

## WEB-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

# Action Research to Study Homelessness and High Mobility in School Communities: *Summary of Essays* 2005-2006

## II. School Attachment and Access to Educational Services

**Chapter 7:** *Our Hidden Homeless Population* by Anne Marie Arbo, Interfaith Hospitality Network; Jim Neigherbauer, Ferguson High School; and Laurie Smith, High School Academy, (Loveland, Colorado)

Describes process in interviewing students and families to gain a greater awareness of the prevalence and issues of homelessness in a small city. Presents findings and identifies next steps to increase community awareness of the homeless population.

**Chapter 8:** *Improving Communication and Increasing Access to Resources* by Mak Tibbetts, School Parent/Business Owner, (Fort Morgan, Colorado)

Provides a look at homelessness in a rural area, based on a community survey to gauge awareness, perceptions, and impacts. Discusses survey findings and includes action steps for schools and communities.

**Chapter 9:** *Are We Helping or Hurting? A Community Approach to Homelessness* by Malora H. Horn, and Philip P. Powers, (Roanoke, Virginia)

The intent of the study was to determine how the city of Roanoke helps those who are homeless. Explores community services offered and examines if these services help by preventing reoccurrences homelessness or do they unintentionally hurt by creating a cycle of homelessness.

**Chapter 10:** *Ashdown Schools* (Ashdown, Arkansas) by Susan Simmons, Ashdown School District, (Ashdown, Arkansas)

Discusses improving customer services to student and families and explores use of staff name badges. Includes interviews, surveys, and planned actions to create welcoming atmosphere in schools.

**Chapter 11:** *Improving the Parent Involvement of Spanish-speaking, Homeless and Highly Mobile Families* by Heather Wilson, Lowry Elementary, (Denver, Colorado)

Explores improving parent and student involvement in schools by fostering family/school communication and making after school programs more accessible. Special attention is given to homeless/highly mobile families with elementary school-aged children and Spanish-speaking parents. Offers suggestions for enhancing use of "Thursday Folders" and language translation of materials.

To see the complete WBPD report visit: <http://www.schoolengagement.org/index.cfm/2005-2006%20Report>

## Chapter 7

# OUR HIDDEN HOMELESS POPULATION

By

Anne Marie Arbo, Community Representative, Interfaith Hospitality Network

Jim Neigherbauer, Principal, Ferguson High School

Laurie Smith, Counselor, High School Academy

Loveland, Colorado

**Abstract:** Describes process in interviewing students and families to gain a greater awareness of the prevalence and issues of homelessness in a small city. Presents findings and identifies next steps to increase community awareness of the homeless population.

**Keywords:** Community Awareness, High School, Poverty, Student and Family Surveys, and Transitional Housing.

### ***Background***

Loveland, Colorado is a community of approximately 60,000 people with a middle class socio-economic level. Loveland is 50 miles north of Denver and borders the south edge of Fort Collins, a city of 138,000 people and the county seat. The two cities have been steadily growing toward each other over the last several decades and are considered by the U.S. government as a single metropolitan area.

The Loveland-Fort Collins area has the same adolescent issues as other cities regarding drugs, alcohol, school issues, etc., but this team feels that the people of Loveland are in denial that a homeless population exists. In Loveland, homelessness is not readily apparent. Most homeless families take refuge in a friend's or relative's home, or stay in sub-standard hotel/motels. Many of the homeless situations involve children and there are no formal shelters in Loveland.

### ***The Loveland Team***

Anne Marie Arbo – Interfaith Hospitality Network

The Loveland Berthoud Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) is a non-profit agency in Loveland, Colorado that provides unique shelter (in a network of Churches), hot meals, comprehensive counseling and mentoring for homeless families with children. The Angel Action Research to Study Homelessness and High Mobility in School Communities

House is part of IHN and is the day center where families meet with a case manager to set goals, further their education, pursue employment opportunities and obtain affordable housing. I first came to this network as a volunteer, and since April of 2004 I have had the privilege of being the Executive Director of this program. IHN has 130 Networks in 36 States with 57 developing networks in 7 new states. This agency was founded in 1986..

Jim Neigherbauer – Principal

I have been an educator for the past 28 years, and for the last three (2003 – 2006) I have been the principal of Ferguson High School in Loveland, Colorado. Ferguson serves approximately 115 students that have attended one or more of the district’s four high schools where, for one reason or another, their experiences were not successful.

Ferguson also houses the district’s Teen Parent Program and has an on-site nursery for the students’ children. At any time of the year we could have between 3-7 infants and 4-6 toddlers. Many of the students parent, work full time, go to school full time, and some live on their own with no parental involvement.

Laurie Smith – Counselor

I have been in education for 27 years and have been a counselor for 15 years. Currently, I counsel students at an alternative program called The Academy that serves 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders. The Academy is housed on the grounds of Ferguson High School where Jim is the principal, but the Academy is not part of Ferguson. I am also the district’s homelessness liaison for McKinney-Vento. I track all adjudicated students in the district and work with the families of expelled students.

***How We Got Started: Our Team/Our Goals:***

The three of us deal with homeless families and youth on a daily basis, yet as we meet with various groups in the community, Loveland appears to be at the beginning stages of recognizing that the community has a homeless population of families and youth. When our team heard about the Web Based Professional Development Project funded by the Colorado Department of Education, we met and decided that it would be a great opportunity to research attitudes and perceptions of and about homelessness.

According to Garcia (1998), the power of stigmatization is that what teachers believe and translate into expectations for poor children is what poor children come to believe about themselves. Teachers who expect children to fail create children who fail.

Kozol (1991) believes that the stigma of poverty is a social interaction that operates between members of an out-group (the “have-nots”) and an in-group (the “haves”). The “haves” tend to treat the “have-nots” as inferior to themselves. Such factors as less money, less up-to-date apparel, and less elegant language equate to less humanness.

Thus the stigma of poverty is one of lesser humanity in the eyes of those who are not poor. Because they are “haves”, teachers of poor children often believe (or behave from a subconscious belief) that such children are inferior- less capable of learning, less willing to learn- in short, less human than children more advantaged.

According to Ruby Payne (1998), it is the responsibilities of educators and others who work with the poor to teach the differences and skills/rules that will allow the individual to make choices. As it stands now for many of the poor, the choice never exists.

As a result of this research, our team chose to explore the following:

- The needs of our homeless population
- How schools support and welcome families and students who are considered homeless by definition of McKinney-Vento
- How our team could begin educating our community regarding this population and their needs.

## ***Methodology***

Our research is a qualitative design using surveys and interview questions. The first survey was designed for the students at Ferguson High School. At different times in the school year, 60% of Ferguson students were homeless according to the McKinney–Vento Act. For us, this high percentage stood as an encouragement to survey all of the students at this high school. The second survey was designed for families in transitional housing, while the third instrument was designed to interview each family member in a family that was homeless. The

fourth instrument was designed to interview homeless high school students using a one-on-one format.

### ***Goals:***

The goals for these surveys were to:

- Find out student/family needs, thoughts and feelings.
- Find out if students feel that Ferguson is warm and welcoming.
- Find out if students felt the other district high schools are warm and welcoming.
- Look at community needs and awareness.

### ***Results: First survey***

#### Survey Findings from Students

Approximately 88% of the students (89 out of 101) at Ferguson High School took the survey. The survey showed that most homelessness was due to family problems or money and lasted an average of 24 months. A little more than one third of the students stated they were homeless at one point and admitted that drugs and alcohol were involved.

All respondents attended an average of 2.5 elementary schools, two middle schools, and almost three high schools during their educational experience. They moved an average of just fewer than six times (5.7 times) after leaving their family's home. Not surprisingly, 58% of the students said their grades dropped after they moved out of their family's home. The survey indicated the following needs:

- Transportation - 49%
- Medical - 40%
- Dental - 35%
- Food and Housing - 36%

The survey also indicated that 57% of the students at Ferguson knew how to access resources in the community. However, 53% of the students surveyed indicated that students at the other high schools would not know how to access these resources.

There were several narrative questions on the survey regarding the “climate” at Ferguson High School as well. Summary of these responses are as follows:

- “Both students and teachers respect and comfort others.”
- “Teachers treat the students at Ferguson as adults.”
- “It is a safe home for me.”
- “Staff listens with open minds. They understand and are willing to help.”
- “It is smaller, and the staff is good and understanding.”
- “The person at the front desk is why we feel welcomed.”

Respect is the resounding quality that was repeated over and over in the survey. It is what allows our students to enjoy school and feel safe. Students talked about how the smaller environment enables this respect to exist at a degree that other schools cannot function at because of their size. Students also talked about how the “family” environment makes the school welcoming.

### ***Results: Second survey***

#### Survey Findings from Families in Transitional Housing

Three families in transition were asked to take a similar survey to the surveys that Jim and Laurie offered. Two of the three families have progressed thru IHN, and one is still with us. The two families that are in stable housing, live in Section 8 and in a two year program with the housing authority called Tenant Based Rental Assistance. We hope that this family will roll over in June to a housing authority program. These are the findings.

- Each of the three families stayed intact while being homeless. This is unusual as most families separate at some time during homelessness.
- All three families in the last five years have lived in a shelter, campground, motel, or with relatives and friends.
- The location for living depended on the time of year, unemployment, domestic violence, job changes, state to state moves and evictions.
- The time frame for being homeless varied from 4 days to 2 ½ years. Interestingly, one of these families has been homeless nine times since they have had children.

- The average number of schools attended is 3.6. Two of the three families reported that their children’s grades dropped.
- The average number of moves in the last five years was six.
- The average number of moves in the last year was 2.7.
- All three families reported the schools in Loveland to be very welcoming. This was not so in other places.
- When asked if changing schools could be made easier, one family replied, “It can’t. Children have to have a stable environment.”
- Needed help with:
  - Clothing : 2 out of 3
  - Housing: 3 out of 3
  - School Supplies: 1 out of 3
  - Transportation: 1 out of 3
  - Counseling: 2 out of 3 (two families are in family therapy)
  - Food: 1 out of 3
  - Medical: 2 out of 3
  - Dental: 3 out of 3
  - Utilities: 1 out of 3
  - Car repairs: 2 out of 3
- Three out of three knew how to access resources.
- Three out of three knew how to access shelter in immediate area.

## ***Discussion***

### A Real Life Perspective of Transitional Houses

When families finally make the transition into a program such as Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN), there is a period of time needed for them to settle in and learn to trust. When they first arrive, there are enormous amounts of plastic bags, boxes, suitcases and anything that will hold their stuff. A very telling sign that the families are likely to make a good transition and work with the program is when this stuff begins to go away. Being without a home is extremely difficult. When a family moves into a shelter situation, people often hope that because it is stable, although somewhat temporary, life would become easier. Sadly, it does not. Children learn in their very early years (a time when they should be enjoying childhood) to adapt. This is sad because when a child is forced to wear many hats and attitudes, they are put under stresses that most children find very difficult to deal with.

We see many children who become lost, not only to themselves, but also to society. Oftentimes, many of these children are inaccurately labeled to need special education or are classified with disorders such as “ADD”. The diagnostic for these children is based on their actions when they are simply letting off steam because of their housing situations. For example, imagine staying in a car every evening where fear permeates your feelings because every move you make could attract the attention of the authorities. This is what some of our families are experiencing.

### ***Results: First Interview***

#### Interview Findings from a Homeless Family in a Motel

We also interviewed a family that was living in a local motel. The family consists of both parents and two sons. The family had resided in Loveland and had owned their own home and business. They decided they wanted to move to Oregon, so they sold their house, packed up everything they owned and moved.

The challenges seemed to begin with the schools in Oregon. The younger son is autistic, and the mother said that when she went to the school to meet with the teacher, the school was not welcoming and they refused to let her observe the classroom. A similar experience occurred when they were investigating alternative high schools for their oldest son. The father could not find work, and they had difficulty finding a home that would meet their needs. They returned to Loveland and lived in a motel for several months. They no longer had the money to purchase a home, and between the cost of the attempted move and the motel/food bills, they were soon completely out of money.

The family felt shame and embarrassment about their situation and struggled with the fact that they met the criteria for a homeless family. The oldest son struggled desperately with the lack of privacy that resulted from four people living in one motel room. He would try to stay away from his family by going to friends' houses or just walking around to avoid the situation. This impacted the entire family because prior to the move, the family was very close and did a lot together. The financial stress at this point in the marriage brought the discussion of divorce to the forefront. The parents were not speaking anymore, the oldest was gone all the

time and the younger autistic boy needed routine and structure. As grim as the story is, the mother's greatest fear was that the schools would not let her enroll the kids because they did not have an address. She cried as she recalled this anxiety. She said that when she went to register both boys for school, one at Ferguson and one at one of the regular high schools, both schools were extremely welcoming and her fears were unfounded.

In summary, from this interview, the strain for this family was certainly financial. However, the lack of privacy for each family member was also an integral part of the difficulties that came about during this time. The older son's avoidance due to shame and lack of privacy broke down family relationships. The parents had been married for over 30 years with a very solid marriage and were now thinking about divorce. Over all, the mom's first and foremost concern was school for her children, and she was terrified of rejection due to the lack of having an address. We learned a lot from this interview about sensitivity to the emotional needs of the entire family.

## ***Results: Second Interview***

### Interview Findings from Two High School Homeless Students

During our more personal interviews, we interviewed two female high school students, a senior and a junior. One had been homeless on her own, and the other had lived with her family of four. Both students are teen moms. One was out of school for part of a year, and the other had attended six schools in the past five years. Both students felt it was important that the school made them feel welcomed, that the teachers cared that they showed up, and that the school staff acknowledged their existence. The hardest part of staying in school for them was "getting there", and when at school, not knowing whether or not they had somewhere to go afterwards. It was hard on both students to hear other students talk about their homes. This made it very difficult to talk about their situations.

The reasons for their homeless situations varied from not having electricity or water and showering at the neighbors' to bad credit and grandma moving out of state. When asked about the reaction of other students to their living situation one responded that, "Some knew. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade they didn't really understand, but by 9<sup>th</sup> grade they thought it was 'cool', and they

admired the closeness of our family”. The other student said, “No one knew because the drugs covered up a lot”.

One said that the worst part of being homeless was the insecurity of knowing that your belongings are everyone’s. The belongings seemed to “dwindle away” with every move to another place. “Nothing is yours!” The other young lady felt that the lack of “personal space” was awful, especially with a baby. Both saw almost no support from their extended families.

When asked about the “Happy Moments”, one mentioned a large number of “friends” and not having mom breathing down her neck. The other young lady said, “It’s sad, but the happy moments were the drugs. We’d go to school high, meet some good people, but also some weirdoes. Our family got closer.”

Both cried when they were asked about the “Saddest Moments”. One responded that the saddest part was “the loneliness and not really knowing someone. Everybody has a mask. People steal and lie to you.” The other girl said that “the crying and the hospital bills were the worst. Thoughts of suicide were brought on by other people’s comments.” For one of the girls, our school was the strongest support, and for the other it was her parents.

We want to include a quote from one of the girls that sums up her experience:

*It sucked. I only remember the good parts. We lived in a camping area where we had to take 3 minute showers. We got stronger and we got quicker at doing things. Nothing worse could happen.*

## **Conclusion**

Even though the Loveland Community is only now beginning to recognize its homeless problem, we have presented a small, but accurate overview of a portion of the problem. We believe the schools can play a large role in helping alleviate the pain of homelessness. By being supportive and presenting a caring and non-judgmental environment, schools can either help make a situation less stressful or add to the stress and embarrassment of homeless kids and their parents.

Although more than half of the students in an “at-risk” high school believe they know where to access services, some homeless families may still find themselves in a “Catch 22” situation without a home, address and phone, depending on the agency they are involved with.

### ***Steps Forward***

Our next steps will be presenting this information to the City of Loveland Housing Authority and the city’s homeless task force to increase awareness of our truly hidden homeless population. Now that we have shared this information with the school district, we hope that it can be incorporated into the new teacher induction program, the Homeless Task Force and all the administrators in the district. Our next step will be to expand our sample by surveying all four high schools (approximately 5000 students) to see if the alternative high school is a fair representation of the City of Loveland.

### **Summary of WBPD Process**

1. Determined the expertise and information each member of our team brought to the Web Based Professional Development Research Project.
2. Used our expertise and information regarding homelessness, we focused on school climate and the emotions and attitudes of homeless students and families.
3. Surveyed 115 alternative high school students assessing needs, attitudes, thoughts and feelings toward homelessness, school environment and resources.
4. Surveyed three homeless families in transitional housing assessing the causes and duration of their homelessness and their emotional needs.
5. Interviewed each member of a family living in a motel assessing the impact homelessness has on the family structure and the emotional impact on each individual family member.
6. Interviewed two homeless high school students assessing the emotional impact and barriers homelessness creates in attempting to finish high school.
7. Calculated and summarized data the WBPD Research team accumulated to determine findings and next steps.

## ***References***

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**Epilogue:** Since Ferguson has been such a successful experience for so many students, our team felt that their responses would be honest and that we would have their full cooperation. According to the definition of homeless by McKinney-Vento, many of our students qualify as “homeless” therefore we focused on determining our level of support for homeless students/families both at our school and in the community. Our team was not too surprised by our findings so we hope to expand our study by increasing our sample size to include the other four high schools (4,000 students). This will be done next year September 2006 – June 2007. Increasing the sample size will allow us to be more informed and better able to help the schools and community address the plight of our homeless students and families.

## *Appendix*

### **First Survey: Student Survey:**

1. I am currently living with my parent/s. Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
2. Please check all that apply to your last 5 years:
  - Lived/living in a shelter \_\_\_\_
  - Lived/living in a campground/RV/car \_\_\_\_
  - Lived/living in a hotel/motel \_\_\_\_
  - Lived/living in transitional housing \_\_\_\_
  - Lived/living with relatives \_\_\_\_
  - Lived/living with friends \_\_\_\_
3. If you checked any of the 6 choices in number 2, what caused this situation to happen?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. How long were you/have you been, in this situation? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Were drugs or alcohol involved in this situation? Yes\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
6. How many schools have you attended? (Please put a number for each)
  - Elementary \_\_\_\_\_
  - Middle/Junior high \_\_\_\_\_
  - High School \_\_\_\_\_
7. Did your grades drop when you stopped living at home? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
8. How many times have you moved? \_\_\_\_\_  
How many times have you moved since leaving your parents' home? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you feel welcome at Ferguson, no matter what your situation is? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
Why? What makes/ doesn't make Ferguson welcoming? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. How are you treated at your school by:
  - Staff \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other students \_\_\_\_\_
11. Were your other schools welcoming and supportive?  
If so, how were they? \_\_\_\_\_

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12. Has Ferguson support been different than other schools' support? If so, how?

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13. How could all schools be more supportive?

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14. Do you, or anyone you know, need help with any of the following?

- |                  |                       |
|------------------|-----------------------|
| Clothing _____   | School supplies _____ |
| Food _____       | Utilities _____       |
| Housing _____    | Transportation _____  |
| Medical _____    | Medication _____      |
| Counseling _____ | Dental _____          |

15. Do you know how to access the resources listed above to get the help you need to be successful? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

16. Do you think that kids at other schools in similar situations know how to get help? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

17. Are you familiar with "Loveland Cares" ? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

They provide services such as: (Please put a checkmark by the area you are needing assistance with)

- Food \_\_\_\_\_
- Supplies \_\_\_\_\_
- Rent \_\_\_\_\_
- Heat \_\_\_\_\_
- Medical \_\_\_\_\_
- Dental \_\_\_\_\_
- Lunch on Saturdays \_\_\_\_\_

Would you be willing to contact "Loveland Cares" ? Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_

Their number is 667-4939



9. Are your children made welcome at the schools they have attended?

yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_

what makes them feel welcome?\_\_\_\_\_

what makes them feel unwelcome?\_\_\_\_\_

what could you as a parent do to help them?\_\_\_\_\_

what could the school do to help them?\_\_\_\_\_

10. What schools offered the most support?

elementary\_\_\_

middle/junior high\_\_\_

high school\_\_\_

11. How could changing school be made easier? \_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you help your children with homework? yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_

13. Do you help your children solve school problems? yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_

14. Are you all receiving the help you need? yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_

do you need help with any of the following?

clothing\_\_\_

food\_\_\_

housing\_\_\_

medical\_\_\_

medication\_\_\_

dental\_\_\_

school supplies\_\_\_

utilities\_\_\_

transportation\_\_\_

car repairs\_\_\_\_\_

counseling\_\_\_

other\_\_\_

15. Do you know how to access resources to get the help you need?

yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_

16. Would you share this information with other families in a similar situation? yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_

17. If yes how would you do this?\_\_\_\_\_

if no what is your main reason for not sharing \_\_\_\_\_

18. If needed again do you know how to find shelter in this immediate area?

yes\_\_\_ no\_\_\_

### **First Interview Questions: Homeless Family in Motel**

1. Who does your family consist of?
2. Are there any special circumstances in your family?
3. How did you become homeless?
4. What are some of the feelings you struggled with?
5. How did homelessness impact each member of your family?
6. What was your greatest fear during your period of homelessness?

### **Second Interview Questions: Two Homeless High School Students**

1. How many schools have you attended?
2. What's important to you when you go to a new school?
3. What's the hardest part about staying in school when you're homeless?
4. What caused your homelessness?
5. Do other kids know you're homeless? How do they react?
6. How did homelessness impact your family?
7. What's the worst part about being homeless?
8. How much support did you get from your extended family?
9. Were there happy moments?
10. What were the saddest moments?
11. Who has been your strongest support?
12. Have you ever repeated a grade?

## Chapter 8

# INCREASING COMMUNICATION AND IMPROVING ACCESS TO RESOURCES

By

Mak Tibbetts, Community Member

Columbine School

Fort Morgan, Colorado

**Abstract:** Provides a look at homelessness in a rural area, based on a community survey to gauge awareness, perceptions, and impacts. Discusses survey findings and includes action steps for schools and communities.

**Keywords:** Access to Resources, Community Awareness, Literature Review, Parent/family Involvement, Poverty, and Community Survey

### *Situation and Context*

For the past sixteen years I have been a resident of Fort Morgan, a rural community in Colorado, which is located in the northeastern part of the state in Morgan County. Moving here from Denver, it was a bit of an adjustment as at that time the population of Fort Morgan was about 8,000. Today, the town continues to grow and has a population of about 12,000. A strong portion of the population growth comes from the migrant families moving here to work in the seasonal agricultural jobs, the beef processing plant, and now we have a growing retail/restaurant business community developing.

According to U.S. Census 2000 figures, immigrant populations in Morgan County increased 218% since 1990. My husband and I have been, and are currently business owners. We own and operate a four screen theatre and a drive-in theatre. We have three children, ages 15, 12, and 7, school ages and therefore, are active parents in our elementary, middle school, and high school. Homelessness and highly mobility is certainly a challenge within our schools and our business community. Each classroom has a growing percentage of at-risk students resulting in changes throughout our educational system.

As a selected school in the current research project with the Colorado Department of Education on the Homeless and Highly Mobile student population, Columbine Elementary

School of Ft. Morgan enlisted a three person research team for the school year of 2005-2006, the principal of the school, the ESL teacher, and a community member. As the community member, I bring to the team, a sampling of Ft. Morgan's community outlook and understanding of how we accommodate the homeless and highly mobile student population.

Our team reviewed and studied the three main domains of educational practice as it pertains to the highly mobile students, and each chose a domain to research. My domain addressed the issues that get in the way of education under the title: "access to educational service." The main topic became how well the community and the school district "communicates" to fulfill the needs of our highly mobile and homeless students, once they have been identified within our schools.

### ***Literature Background***

In rural school districts, the provision of and access to services often may be limited or may stigmatize families who are already struggling to meet their basic food and shelter needs (Learning Point Associates). Homelessness among migrant workers is largely a rural phenomenon (Vissing, 1996). There are far fewer shelters in rural areas; therefore, people experiencing homelessness are less likely to live on the street or in a shelter, and more likely to live in a car or camper, or with relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing (NCH Fact Sheet #11).

Rural homelessness is most pronounced in rural regions that are primarily agricultural (Aron and Fitchen, 1996). In many ways, it is easier for our schools to identify those children at-risk. Frequent moves or absences are easier to identify between schools, and by school staff. Identification of a possible family in crisis can then expedite intervention and provision of the necessary outreach program our community provides. Partnerships are crucial between our schools and the many agencies and organizations available in providing support to the H&HM students (Davis, D (2000)). How well the district collaborates with the community to provide information and training to school staff can provide community links for programs, community activities, and helpful services as a critical connection for students and families in crisis (J.L.Epstein 2002). According to Henderson and Mapp (2002), effective programs to engage families and communities embrace a philosophy of partnership. Increasing

opportunities for professional development on how to connect families and community members enforces relationship-building strategies which enhance connections and supports increased student achievement. Community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement. Meeting the needs of H&HM students and their families will result in the student's attendance and academic improvements. Columbine Elementary is unique in its ability to connect and reach out, building relationships with so many of the community's organizations and agencies that offer H&HM students the advantages necessary for their educational advancement.

### ***Process***

As a greenhorn to the educational research process, I reviewed the PAR materials and prepared my research, developing my guiding purpose statement. It was apparent that my first step would be to go out into the community and gather comments, feedback and information from various community members. With a survey designed (see appendix), I then began to interview community people (i.e., businesses, city government, law enforcement, clergy, medical staff, parents, recent graduates). A separate survey was used if school personnel were interviewed. Later, a different survey was used to interview a group of young students, ages 13-16.

Initially, I asked the following questions of the community participants:

- 1) When I say to you, Homeless & Highly Mobile, connect this phrase with our Community.
- 2) Do you feel we have a significant number of H&HM students attending our Schools?
- 3) What impact do you feel H&HM students have on the educational system...in our schools?
- 4) If you have children in our schools, do the H&HM students change the classroom learning environment for your student(s)? Please explain.
- 5) Do you feel our community addresses the H&HM population actively?
- 6) Do we have a "shelter"(s) in our community?
- 7) Do we have a H&HM liaison working in our district or community?

- 8) Does the community need to become more active in our services available to H&HM families?

As I got further into the interviews, I began to realize that our community had a generic understanding and definition for “homelessness.” It was more of an urban description - people living under bridges, sleeping on street corners under boxes, mostly with alcohol/drug problems, or down-and-out society outcasts. Highly mobile was interpreted as “migrant” mostly and so I began to see that there was a distinct difference of understanding between the school’s definition based on the McKinney-Vento Act and the IDEA legislation, and our general community’s outlook. There was an awareness of a shelter or two because of recent newspaper articles or because of the longevity of one of the shelter’s existence. As for a liaison, even within our school buildings, there was uncertainty about such a person(s) or about what this title would mean as for the job description.

The elementary schools were very much aware of their “Family Liaison” person and explained the importance of this person with the H&HM children. Impact on education was most definitely a “hot” topic, especially to the parents of students in our district. Of course our classrooms are reflective of the challenges this population puts on education and most definitely our curriculum has changed. Teachers were frustrated and concerned by the stress and the demands within the classroom. They feel they don’t have enough time to devote to one-on-one time for any type of “learning” style. Parents are concerned that classes are stressing mostly reading and writing reducing the importance of history and science, reflective in the ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and CSAP (Colorado School Accountability Performance) testing as an example. The arts programs are suffering, as are the gifted and talented programs, questioning the district’s priorities. Comments made to parents from teachers such as, “The higher GPA students will make it anyway,” and the practice of having the more advanced students tutor other struggling classmates, which then prevents them from being academically stimulated are certain concerns. Sizes of classrooms are at times out of the range for the “best” teacher-pupil ratio. Surveys reflected the question of whether any student, especially an at-risk student can possibly benefit from a classroom that is obviously oversized, making it difficult for one teacher to give the extra attention

needed, controlling the amount of chatter, and when a highly mobile child arrives, properly evaluating where that child should be in relationship with the present curriculum.

Language barriers disrupt the speed by which the class may progress with given material. After school programs are commendable for our district and are offering wonderful opportunities for schoolwork help, reading advancement and enrichment social activities. Parent-teacher conferences are very important to the parents because they allow the parent an opportunity to really connect with their child's teacher(s). Teachers noted that they were seeing a pattern with highly mobile parents thinking that everything was great with their child.

Lunch programs are another area of diverse input. Importance of breakfast offerings is very supported but the nutritional value of the "frozen" microwaveable foods now offered was again questioned. It is important to offer all children fresh foods and menus that will stimulate healthy bodies and minds. Our menus received much criticism from parents and students. Bringing me to the student-school relationship.

A second survey interviewing a young middle school student group shared their concerns with "not being heard". Many of these students were highly mobile students, with Fort Morgan being their third and fourth school district by the time they had reached 7th or 8th grade. When asked what the most important ingredient to their success was, they responded emphatically that they liked the schools that made them feel like they mattered; the teachers that made them feel they cared about their success, and the administrations that made them feel safe. Comments like, "If they really want to know how we feel, they need to ask us." Teachers that conduct structured classrooms are the most academically successful for kids that struggle and teachers that are respectful are "respected" even when language can be a difficulty. As we come to the end of our school year and we have encountered the "illegal" immigration rallies and demonstrations, many of the attitudes and responses have been heightened by recent weeks.

I am very encouraged by all of the organizations and agencies within our community that seem to have similar and common goals for the homeless and highly mobile population throughout our county. Again, the surveys and interviews revealed a certain "gap", however.

Communication between these agencies and organizations is taking place in its own format. An upcoming event, later this summer may serve to be very important to our schools. Key personnel from many of our agencies will come together for a brainstorming session. Out of this meeting, we will be even more equipped to merge with our school district, offering better support for professional development, better efficiency in coordinating services of community agencies with the at-risk student population. Continuous collaboration with homeless service providers and other civic groups will best serve homeless students. Promising practices implemented as part of a comprehensive and coordinated homeless education program will help prevent at-risk students from falling between the cracks.

In conclusion, after all interviews were completed, it was obvious that a certain population of our community has an “awareness” deficit with regard to the H&HM population that our school district serves, but I am encouraged by the terrific programs available that will certainly connect an at-risk family to the services needed, helping to aid to their academic advancement.

### ***Results***

My interview and survey data resulted in several community climates reflective of the communication between “community and school district”. They are:

1. Homelessness and Highly Mobile has a definite definition for the school district but is far more generic for the general community population. Increased awareness by the community at large is evolving constantly through media attention via newspaper articles and stories, government agencies and organizations distributing pamphlets about their services within the school district, and professional development within the school buildings. Active programs hosted by civic groups are helping to make the business community more aware of agency offerings and how they are working toward “long-term solutions, not short-term fixes.”
2. Parents generally feel that their involvement is key to their student’s success. They are concerned with the H&HM student population’s impact on our schools’ class size, curriculum choices, program cuts, and quality of teachers that our district can attract.

3. Highly mobile students identify their differences to the more “stable” student and identify their similarities. Overall, students prefer a teacher that is respectful, that asks them their opinions and truly shows a desire for the student to be successful.

4. Organizations and agencies in the community are working hard to make their services known and utilized. Recruitment to become a partner with the school district is a current directive for the upcoming 2006-2007 school year, under a more comprehensive collaboration of agency services. In August, this will be on the agenda of a countywide meeting for all government and community agencies/groups/organizations.

To review the outcome of my findings, I can clearly state that there is much taking place within our community to bridge the possible gaps. Many agencies are now working together, meeting with district personnel and taking a strong stand to publicize who they are, what they offer, and how they can be accessed.

### ***What Was Learned***

Rural homelessness and the highly mobile population of our Fort Morgan community are mainly the result of poverty, immigration, and a lack of resources. We are in a trend of growth due to our agricultural base and food processing plants. As the population grows, we experience social impact in our community of business, education, medical care, housing, and diversity within our neighborhoods. The school district is addressing the homeless and highly mobile student population with continued education, review of test scores, extended lunch programs to include breakfast, transportation availability, after-school enrichment programs, family liaisons, and many more offerings. Each school faces its challenges with a “heads on” approach, striving to improve and meet the needs of the H&HM student. Parents are recognizing the impact of the H&HM students and the importance they play in their own child’s educational career within our district. Businesses feel the community has a very adequate involvement in the ability to meet the need of the H&HM students but awareness is not the best. Perhaps more can be done to offer a center of information, such as a Chamber of Commerce information booth. Finally, the numerous agencies and organizations are rich in numbers within our county. A quote from one of their pamphlets summarizes the outlook of so many of these agencies:

*“Increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees are coming to our community and they are coming from increasingly diverse countries, backgrounds, ethnic groups and religions. Communities that don’t reach out to newcomers risk having separate and divisive ‘we-they’ neighborhoods. It is essential to provide the tools that will help immigrants put down roots and become true members of our community.”*

-The Colorado Trust, 2005

### ***Steps for Others to Follow***

As I reread my journaling and review my research, I would encourage all school districts to partner with their community’s many agencies, shelters, churches, civic groups and most importantly, parents. Open communication between the district and its community can help convey the need for involvement by service agencies, civic groups and others offering support and help. Newspaper articles, civic programs, parent-teacher programs, newsletters, and appointing key personnel to attend community functions can bridge many gaps. Parents can play more active roles in schools, making them aware of unique challenges our schools face. Becoming a part of the solution in our schools and in our community will make a difference.

Involving parents is so important for a school’s well being. Parents in this day and age, usually are very busy whether they work outside the home or not. When a parent can volunteer their time to a school, we should cherish this involvement. They can offer many services for the classroom and for the student. Homeless and highly mobile students may academically prosper from having someone besides their busy, over-extended teacher, giving them a one-on-one hour or two on a weekly basis. Parents will feel good about their being asked to be involved and definitely be rewarded. Parents then go back to the community with more awareness of the school’s challenges. Awareness is crucial to make the necessary changes for the H&HM student population.

### **Action Steps:**

<b>STEP</b>	<b>WHO INVOLVED</b>	<b>TASKS</b>
Attend student registration and/or parent/teacher conferences	School Liaison, representatives of various agencies from the community that offer assistance to new families, ideally highly mobile or homeless	<p>Meet with agencies and organizations prior to these dates to decide which representatives will attend. Include this information in all school information that goes out to the families in the district and in the newspaper.</p> <p>Have stations set up at registration or Parent/Teacher conferences that are very easy to identify, therefore using Spanish signs as well as English and having an interpreter.</p>
Invite key personnel from pertinent agencies to conduct a helpful informative meeting with school staff	School administration and teachers, as well as secretary, liaison, and translator	<p>.Agency staff can help make school staff aware of their services and support. Pamphlets, brochures and the like can be left with a school for easy reference and access.</p> <p>Agency staff can answer questions about how a school employee proceeds once a student has been identified with a specific need.</p> <p>Follow up phone conversations, new materials, and updated information can be continuously given to the school's secretary</p>
Continued interaction between the district office and community organization and agencies	District Liaison, individual school liaisons, secretaries, counselors, and principals	<p>The concept of a "hot line" to perhaps the key agencies from the specified contact person at individual schools to make available help just a phone call away.</p> <p>The district liaison should attend more community meetings involving agencies, organizations and community groups who have the ability or potential to be an important supplier for the H&amp;HM student and family in the way of meeting crucial needs.</p>
Connecting with the community through media and civic groups	District Liaison, principals, and school counselor	<p>Publication of important information for the community that will inform them of a school's progress, particular need, or partnership with an agency can allow involvement from others in the community resulting in more assistance for the school.</p> <p>Programs by School Personnel for various civic groups are a great way to communicate with the community.</p>

## *Appendix 1*

Homeless/Highly mobile survey #1

September-November 2005

Community person \_\_\_\_\_

Business o Organization o Agency o Individual o Clergy o

1. When I say to you, Homeless & Highly Mobile students, connect this phrase with our community and schools...
2. In reading to you the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act used by our school district, do you now feel differently about your first answer?
3. Do you have children in our school district? If so, do you feel your child's education is impacted by the H&HM students, and if so, how?
4. Have your children ever talked to you about a student(s) who could be classified Homeless or Highly Mobile? What is their awareness?
5. Does our community have a homeless "shelter(s)"?
6. Does your school have a liaison for H&HM students? Does our district?
7. Do you feel our community addresses H&HM actively? Do we need to become more active?
8. What agencies or organizations are you aware of that would be excellent resources of help for our schools?

Comments:

## *Appendix 2*

Homeless/highly mobile survey #2

September -November 2005

School Personnel\_\_\_\_\_

1. Does the H&HM population affect the way in which we choose our curriculum?
2. Does the H&HM population affect the way in which we conduct the classroom?
3. Do we require additional staffing to adequately “teach” this population?
4. What more can be done within our schools to help these students achieve?
5. Do we do a good job of welcoming this population?
6. Do we adequately help the foreign language student learn what is expected of them as an American student?
7. How are the high achievers affected by this student population?  
...the middle-of-the-road students?...the struggling students?
8. How can parents assist you to help in the classroom with the H&HM students?
9. Are you familiar with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act? Does our school district have a H & HM liaison?

## Chapter 9

# ARE WE HELPING OR HURTING? A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO HOMELESSNESS

By

Malora H. Horn, M.S.-Homeless Student Program Coordinator

Philip P. Powers, M.S.-Homeless Student Program Mentor

Roanoke, Virginia

**Abstract:** The intent of the study was to determine how the city of Roanoke helps those who are homeless. Explores community services offered and examines if these services help by preventing reoccurrences homelessness or do they unintentionally hurt by creating a cycle of homelessness.

**Keywords:** Access to Resources, Community Awareness, Poverty, and Community Survey

### ***Introduction***

When you think of homelessness what comes to mind? An old man standing on the street corner holding up a sign that reads “Will work for food” or “Homeless veteran, needs work to buy food”? These are only two examples of what a person may see while driving around in the city of Roanoke, Virginia. Many people may find themselves included in a group who share the same thoughts about homeless people. Often homeless people are believed to be lazy, mentally ill, substance abusers, or veterans who society forgot about when the wars ended. It is true that some homeless people do fit into those categories. However, it may not seem so clear to those same people that society has created our own war of not understanding the true reasons of homelessness, especially for families and children.

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness website, “at least 1.35 million children are homeless during a year’s time.” ([www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org)) The majority of homeless people in this Country are families. The following information helps support this idea. “Families with children are among the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. Family homelessness is increasing. Requests for emergency shelter by families have increased every year since 1985, with an average increase of 20% in 2002. (Burt, 2001).

What do these families look like? What do they feel? Do they feel anything? Why are they living in a shelter, a hotel, at a friend's house, or the worst case scenario on the street? Do they want to learn how to help themselves? Do they just want someone else to help them? For some, it may be a one time event in their lives. For others it may seem to be a way of life. Who is to blame? Is them or is it us? The word "us" meaning the community; where they live, go to school, work, and play. The community they call home and are supposed to be made to feel a part of in a true community sense. Does the community truly work together to help end homelessness or do we just make it worse?

All of these questions lead us to engage in a form of research, known as Participatory Action Research (PAR). This enabled us to study some of the questions we had about homelessness. One needs to understand the importance of the interaction one has with those who have the answers. Since we have never been homeless, we can only speculate what it must feel like, in most cases, to lose everything, including your home.

The misconception often associated with the word "homeless" make it imperative to meet and talk with them, as a person/an individual, like you and me, not only as a "homeless" person. Many uncontrollable events can lead to homelessness. Natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, caused thousands of people to lose everything they owned. Hurricane Katrina and the media coverage it received forced our nation to face homelessness in a way like never before. In fact, even though the impact of Hurricane Katrina was a tragedy for many of those who lived on the Gulf Coast, it was a tragedy for us who did not live there as well. Communities across America offered their assistance and help. In Roanoke, our shelters, our community, and our schools welcomed these people and their children to offer them assistance too. It brought homelessness to a different light in that it made people realize no one is protected from losing their home or their life as they know it. This leads to one of the most crucial reasons PAR can be helpful in seeking out information about a particular subject, such as homelessness.

### ***First Cycle of Research***

To get a better understanding of how the public defines community, we went to a local mall and stood at what appeared to be one of the busiest entrances. We asked every 5<sup>th</sup> person

coming through the doors (of course, babies and very young toddlers were excluded) This was by no means a professional, scientific research study, nor was it intended to be such. It stood in as a mini-survey for our first round of action research. The responses were quite interesting. Our final tally of the number of people asked was 33. Out of those 33 people surveyed the following summary explains how we conducted this survey and our findings:

Usually, when someone is approached in a mall or on the street, people usually think they will be asked to give a money donation.

At first, people did seem a little apprehensive to let us talk to them. This is how we approached them with the question:

(Sir or Miss): Could you please give us just a couple minutes of your time to complete our survey? We are not asking for you to give any money, nor or we soliciting any type of donation. We are only interested in your opinion about the word “community”.

If they agreed to answer the question, we proceeded with asking the following question:

**Could you please explain to me what you think of when you hear the word “community?”**

The following are five of our responses. There were two researchers present, so we were both asking this question simultaneously as people entered the mall.

**Answers:**

1) “I think of people living and working together and being part of and sharing things they have in common, like a **family** should be with one another.”

2) “When I think of community, I think of my neighborhood. We may not all know one another, but we watch out for one another without even thinking about it. For example, just last week, I noticed a neighbor’s car parked on the street in front of their house and its headlights were on, so I knocked on their front door and told them. If I had been in a neighborhood other than mine own, I wouldn’t have done that, would not felt like I could, but here I feel a sense of responsibility and ownership.”

3) “Community means helping others, not just in your neighborhood, but others in general. If you see someone walking out of the grocery store and they drop a bag of food, you should stop and offer to help them. That is what is wrong with this world today, people are just too self-centered. You need to think about caring, helping, and sharing with those around you. My community is like another word for **family**.”

4) “Community stands for a sense of belonging, like **family**. It also means people should help one another, care about other people, and share with them. If someone has plenty of firewood for the winter and you know someone who is less fortunate, you should offer to give them some of your firewood; it is only the right thing to do.”

5) “Community means feeling ownership, taking responsibility for a place where you and your **family** works and lives. Often people don’t care about their community, businesses fail, people don’t keep up their neighborhoods and then they lose a sense of pride. More people need to take pride in them and in their community.”

The following information includes phrases and/or word(s) used over and over. We have also provided the number of times these words were used:

### ***Survey Findings***

-The phrase “*being a part of*” was stated 17 times

-The word *neighbor or neighborhood* was used 23 times

-The words *caring, helping, and sharing* were used 29 times

And, the number one most used word, “family”. This word was used 31 times while people were describing their definition of *community*.

We were rather amazed 94% of the respondents thought family was an important word to use when telling us about community.

### ***Second Cycle of Research***

We found Roanoke City has addressed the issue of homelessness in a various ways. The City has several emergency shelters, day shelters, and offers transitional housing. Roanoke City

also offers outreach, case management, and other supportive services to those experiencing homelessness. There is also The Roanoke Valley Task Force on Homelessness which monitors the issues of its homeless population. These are just a few of the committees, there are others formed to address these issues. According to information available on Roanoke City's website, the Task Force conducted a survey and the top three needs as addressed by the participants were as follows: Transportation (44%), Housing (36%), and Work (36%). ([www.roanokeva.gov](http://www.roanokeva.gov)).

We also located a definition of "chronic homelessness. "US Interagency Council on Homelessness describes the chronic homeless as unaccompanied adults; homeless for a year or more; multiple times over a several year period." We used this definition in our study.

### ***Third Cycle of Research***

Given the previous information, we decided to conduct a survey in some of our local shelters. We wanted to determine if any of the issues of homelessness and the concerns for chronic homelessness were present in our own community. (The survey we developed and conducted is located in the Appendix).

We surveyed 11 participants, even though we had hoped for more, we were pleased with our efforts and we appreciated those who were willing to help us out. The following information is what we learned:

- 1) 36.4% had previously stayed at the shelter where they were currently residing
- 2) 81.8% stated this was not their first time to stay in a shelter
- 3) Out of the 81.8% who had previously lived in a shelter, we asked them how many times they had lived in the current shelter or another one in the past year:
  - 44.4% responded 2 times
  - 22.2% responded 3 times
  - 22.2% responded 4 times
  - 11.1% responded 5 times
- 4) When the participants were asked the reasons for becoming homeless, most of them had more than one answer; however, we asked them to report the leading reason:
  - 54.5%-Loss of housing

- 27.3%-Domestic violence
  - 18.2%-Loss of employment
- 5) 18.2% responded feeling bad about themselves for having to live in a shelter
- 81.8% reported they wish they did not have to live in a shelter, but were glad they had somewhere they could live
- 6) We asked the participants to indicate how many times in the past two years they had lived in each situation (one participant could list more than one situation):
- 36.4% lived in permanent housing (leased/owned)
  - 81.2% lived with friends/relatives
  - 45.5% lived in a hotel/efficiency (paying daily/weekly)
  - 0.09% lived on the street or out of a car
- 7) 18% were employed at the time of the survey
- 8) Participants were asked if they felt they had received help/support from this shelter and/or other community resources to help prevent you from being homeless in the future:
- 63.7% responded “yes”
  - 36.4% responded “not sure”
- 9) 27.3% stated it didn’t matter if the word “transitional” or “homeless” was used to describe them
- 72.8% stated they preferred the word “transitional”
- 10) When asked where they would go when they left the shelter:
- 18.2% -Permanent housing (leasing/owning)
  - 27.3%-Relatives/Friends
  - 54.6%-Another shelter/transitional living shelter

### ***Our Conclusion***

Based on the surveys at the mall, the information gathered regarding local homeless statistics and the surveys in the shelters, we believe we have found some consistencies.

With regard to the leading causes of homelessness, we compared our smaller subgroup of homeless people to the survey conducted by Roanoke Valley Task Force on Homelessness (RVTFH). Out of the top three reasons reported for being homeless, we each reported two of the same reasons.

RVTFH: Transportation (44%), **Housing** (36%), and **Work** (36%). ([www.roanokeva.gov](http://www.roanokeva.gov)).

Our findings:

- 54.5%-Loss of housing
- 27.3%-Domestic violence
- 18.2%-Loss of **employment**

Using the US Interagency Council on Homelessness' definition of "chronic homelessness" (the chronic homeless as unaccompanied adults; **homeless for a year or more; multiple times over a several year period**" :

When we asked them how many times they had **lived in the current shelter or another one in the past year**: Our findings indicated:

- 44.4% responded 2 times
- 22.2% responded 3 times
- 22.2% responded 4 times
- 11.1% responded 5 times

And, when we asked the participants to indicate how many times in **the past two years they had lived in each situation** (one participant could list more than one situation) our findings indicated:

- 36.4% lived in permanent housing (leased/owned)
- 81.2% lived with friends/relatives
- 45.5% lived in a hotel/efficiency (paying daily/weekly)
- 0.09% lived on the street or out of a car

It would appear, according to these findings, there is an issue of chronic homelessness present in Roanoke City.

When we asked our participants they felt they had received help/support from this shelter and/or other community resources to help prevent you from being homeless in the future:

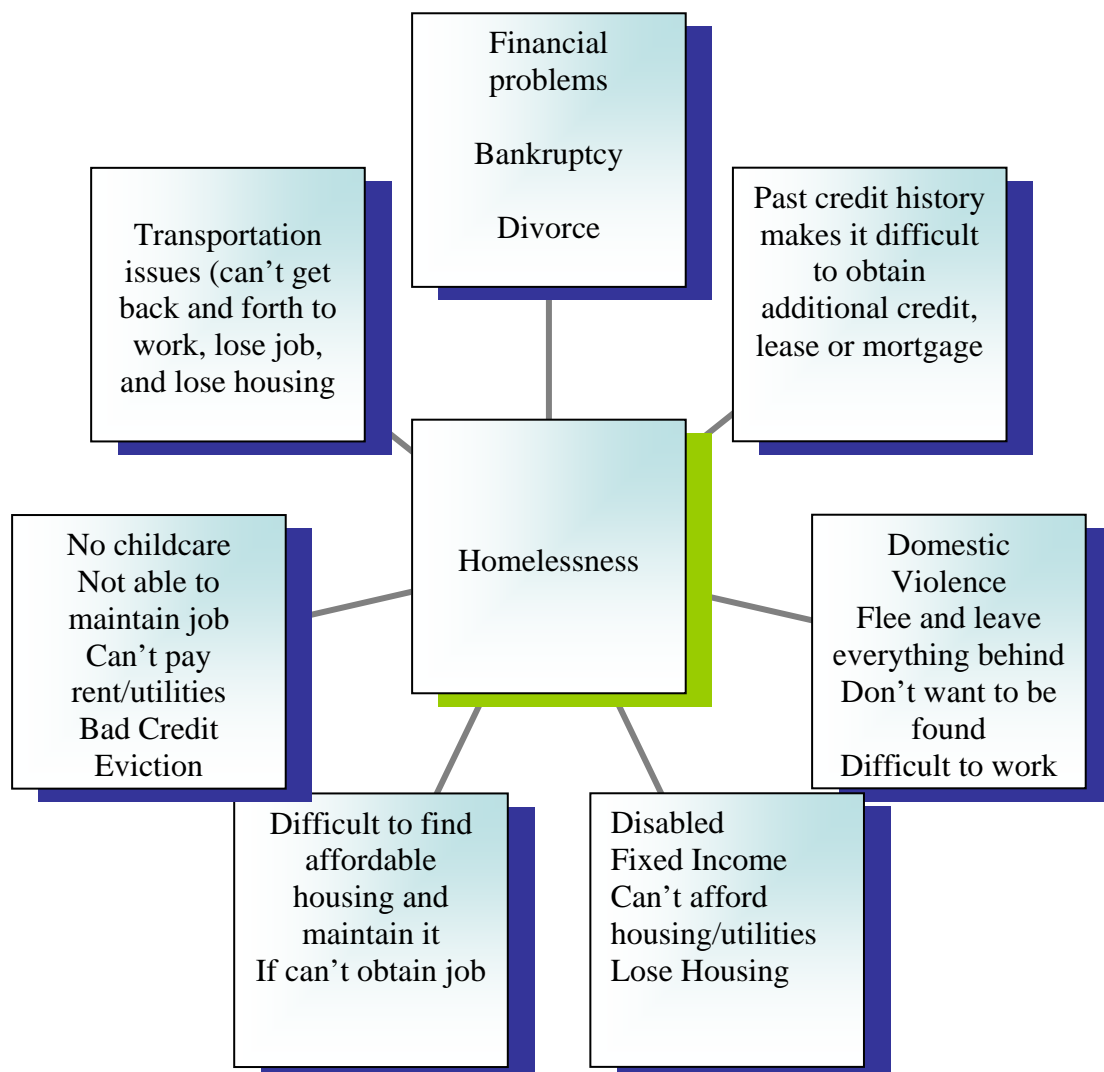
- 63.7% responded "yes"
- 36.4% responded "not sure"

If we review our findings from our initial mini-survey at the mall, 94% of our respondents used the word family in defining the word "community". It would appear to us Roanoke believes community is very important much like a family. It also seems Roanoke citizens

believe in helping and caring for others as well. As stated above, 63.7% of our homeless believe the shelters and other service providers are doing a great job at trying to help the homeless.

We would like to bring another issue to the forefront, before concluding. Remember the never-ending question of which came first, the chicken or the egg? The answer seems to be tautological in the sense one seems to be able to go round and round and never truly answering the question.

We compared some of the possible reasons for chronic homelessness. We wanted to focus on two of the main issues of homelessness we found, housing and employment/work. Please review the following diagram:



If you study the diagram, you will see loss of employment/work and housing problems are multi-faceted. These issues also seem tautological when explaining homelessness. Which comes first? A person loses a job, can't afford housing, gets evicted and then moves to a shelter. Once they are in a shelter it is often difficult to find childcare to attend interviews, no personal transportation, difficult to afford public transportation which then leads to difficulty in obtaining housing. These reasons could go on and on and on. The reasons can continue, never-ending and never changing. These are just a few of the possible reasons for homelessness.

With all of this information we obtained, we now go back to the original question and main reason for our study.

***Does the community truly work together to help end homelessness or do we just make it worse?***

We believe the community does work together and tries to help those who are homeless. Shelter programs and other community services assist people with obtaining employment and locating housing. This type of assistance alone cannot end chronic homelessness. A solution is much bigger than one may think. We do not view homelessness just as a local issue, it is much more global. It is much bigger than one community. In fact, the federal government has recently mandated for each locality to develop a 10-year plan to end homelessness. We believe if the federal government is allowing 10 years developing a plan, it must be a lot bigger problem than we can even begin to imagine.

***Steps to Conduct Study***

For those of you interested in doing a study similar to ours, we recommend the following steps:

**\*\*\* Get approval to be involved in this type of study from your place of employment, supervisor, or whomever it may be necessary for you, before doing any of the suggested steps\*\*\***

- 1) Explore your community to locate the services offered to the homeless
- 2) Tour the shelters, talk to the staff and find out all you can about the different types of shelters in your community. Some shelters are emergency/crisis only, some provide services

up to six months, and some are for domestic violence victims only. There are also transitional living programs that are part of a continuum of care for those ready to live more independently, but not completely ready.

- 3) Turn to the local government to determine their views/opinions of homelessness in your community. Become a part of advocacy groups for the homeless and volunteer.
- 4) Once you feel comfortable in understanding homelessness in your community, learn more. Start looking at your own questions about homelessness and write them down. Once you have developed a list, put it in a survey form and see if you can find some answers.
- 5) Talk to those who you want to learn more about. To truly be part of Participatory Action Research, you must do just that, participate. Make your participants feel comfortable, let them know you genuinely care and are considerate of their privacy and their feelings.
- 6) Be sure to keep all surveys confidential and totally voluntary. This will make it much easier to encourage people to participate.
- 7) Once you have obtained the number of surveys you wanted or as many as you realistically believe you will begin tallying your results.
- 8) Convert this information into percentages and pay attention to trends or similarities in your survey results as compared to others that have surveyed/researched the same.
- 9) Once you have completed your study, think about using your information to obtain grant funding or other funding sources to offer some of the “needed” services that are lacking in your community or even to do more research and find more answers.
- 10) Remember to interact and to participate in this learning process. While observing others can be equally helpful, standing by and being idle, will cheat you out of one of the most valuable lessons you can learn. It is also a great way to learn more about yourself.

*\* Note to the reader\* Chronic homelessness appears by definition only include individuals, but for the purpose of this study it will be used to define not only individuals, but families as well.*

The definition for “chronic homeless” used by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and by the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is limited to only individuals, and does not include “families”. The following definition of homelessness was obtained by researching the Housing and Urban Development official website. However, the website directed us to [http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode42/usc\\_sec\\_42\\_00011302----](http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode42/usc_sec_42_00011302----000-.html) [000-.html](#) [TITLE 42](#) > [CHAPTER 119](#) > [SUBCHAPTER I](#) > § 11302 [Prev](#) | [Next](#)

*§ 11302. General definition of homeless individual*

*a) In general*

*For purposes of this chapter, the term “homeless” or “homeless individual or homeless person” includes*

*(1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and*

*(2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—*

*(A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);*

*(B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or*

*(C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings*

Since this discovery was made toward the end of the study, it is important to note this. This discovery has also initiated a concern by the researchers whether the numbers reflected in the statistics regarding homelessness, over the past decade have even been accurate.

This discovery also seems ironic. One of the main concepts of PAR is the process of studying a particular subject, evaluating the information obtained and adjusting components of the research as a result of information the researcher learns from their participants. Therefore, it would appear the researchers of this study have discovered much more about homelessness than we originally set out to learn. These outcomes make us want to learn more of the political ramifications of this social travesty.

Maybe we are hurting more than helping, because we as a nation are not using the correct definition of homelessness

## ***Reference***

Burt, 2001; Burt, Aron, Douglas, et al., 1999; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2002; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2002.

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## ***Websites***

[www.roanokeva.gov](http://www.roanokeva.gov)

[www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org)



## Chapter 10

# ASHDOWN SCHOOLS

By

Susan Simmons, Family and Community Relations Director

Ashdown School District

Ashdown, Arkansas

**Abstract:** Discusses improving customer services to student and families and explores use of staff name badges. Includes interviews, surveys, and planned actions to create welcoming atmosphere of Ashdown Public Schools.

**Keywords:** Needs Assessment, School District, and Welcoming School Culture

### ***Introduction***

I work in Ashdown School District as the Family and Community Relations Director. Ashdown, Arkansas, a city of 5,000 people, is a community with a free and reduced lunch count from 66% in the primary school to 33% at the high school (a closed campus will go into effect next year and we anticipate a rise in the high school numbers.) Poverty is an issue in our community. We serve 1,663 students and a large part of that population live in some degree of poverty. Forty-six students are identified as homeless. According to our McKinney-Vento project information for 2006, 72% of the identified homeless families are living doubled-up or in sub-standard housing. There are others who are highly mobile, but have not been identified as homeless at this time.

According to a parent/ teacher/student needs assessment conducted by the homeless liaison in 2005, the following is a list of the general needs of our highly mobile population:

- School Supplies
- Affordable and emergency housing
- Emergency food assistance
- Clothing
- Medical issues
- Utility assistance
- Tutoring
- Quality and affordable daycare

Of these needs that could be met, referrals were made to agencies or by grants and donations to help the families.

In addition to the needs assessment, we interviewed highly mobile parents and students. What we learned from the interviews was that parent involvement and public opinion of the school had room for improvement. Feeling unwelcome and unwanted at school was the most often complaint of parents. To explore issues of homelessness and welcoming school climate the following materials were reviewed:

- Dr. Ruby Payne’s work, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, was studied and used as the guide for this work with at-risk children.
- Dr. Paul D. Slocumb’s book, *Hear Our Cry, Boys in Crisis*, is a “must read” for anyone concerned about highly mobile boys and their conflicts.
- *How Students Learn Best: In Safe and Welcoming Schools*, by the Partnership for Kentucky Schools is a useful toolkit for assessing your school atmosphere. The link is <http://www.fcps.net/fcs/default.asp?prcItem=10000>.
- *Education World* has information for schools wanting to improve their atmosphere.
- *Does your schools atmosphere shout “Welcome”?* [http://www.education-world.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin424.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin424.shtml) is a super link to tested ideas that have worked for schools. UCLA’s Center for Mental Health in Schools has an excellent manual with research, articles, survey forms, and other related materials. This manual can be downloaded free. This document is based on the work of Ingersoll, Scammon, and Eckerling, *What Schools Can Do to Meet the Needs of All Students and Families*, which focuses on the risks of students who change schools often and how to support them and their families.

### ***Process***

Activities have been developed to gather some information about the atmosphere of our schools as perceived by the parents and students. The first activity was to give a select group of high school students some homeless education training. I enlisted a small portion of that trained group who were high school EAST Lab students to develop a survey to discover how new students feel about entering Ashdown Public Schools. This was especially interesting to the students after the influx of 27 hurricane evacuees.

## **New students**

New students at all grade levels K-12 were surveyed. The overall rating of the schools by the students was very positive and the greatest need identified was to be reunited with friends or establish a circle of friends. Interesting data coming from the survey was that most highly mobile students in Ashdown moved on an average of every three months.

## **Parents**

Parent interviews and surveys were conducted to find out what parents thought about the school. The personal interviews revealed that we were not as friendly as we hoped and not informative enough for someone who has never visited the school. A change needed to be gradual, so two projects were chosen to address. Action plans were made to make staff identification badges and to provide staff development to school personnel on improving customer relations.

## ***Action Taken***

### **Staff Badges**

The district administrative staff was supportive of wearing staff badges, but principals were reluctant to *require* the staff to wear them. One principal out of 6 said she would require her staff to wear the badges. Her staff was receptive and understood the positive statement badges would make to the public. The staff also understood safety was improved by wearing badges. For two weeks the first school staff wore the badges. Soon other schools were asking why they could not have badges too. We now wear badges district wide. By making it a choice at first rather than a mandate the staff was happy with their new professional look and parents were more confident to discuss issues with the appropriate staff members. This simple tool improved communication between school and parents and helped staff members feel more professional.

### **Customer Service Training**

Improving customer relations was the next step. In the interviews with parents, secretaries had been identified as being rude, so 17 secretaries were targeted for training. Rebecca Alexander, Customer Service Trainer for an energy company, presented the first customer service workshop for all district secretaries. She identified who the customer was, how much

the customer was worth to the school in dollars and cents, and identified ways school staff can win or offend parents. Bringing in someone from outside the educational community gave freshness to the presentation and a point of view not always seen by educators. Those participants attending sessions scheduled in the morning were served a continental breakfast and the afternoon session participants were served fruit, vegetables, crackers and cheese. Each person received a goodie bag with office supplies and door prizes were awarded at the end of each session.

### ***Evidence of Impact***

This summer plans are being made to continue the effort to improve the welcoming atmosphere of Ashdown Schools. The guidebook, *What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families* by UCLA staff, will be used as the guide.

As a result of our work:

- All staff members are now requested to wear identification badges. The negative point is that a few can't keep up with theirs. At the end of school, as a check out procedure, each staff member was required to turn in their badge or pay \$6 to replace it. This has helped to motivate staff to find or keep up with the badge.
- Staff members have reported that parents' eyes will move to the badges when a staff member meets them. The parent will then use the staff members name in conversation. This is a definite step to put parents at ease.
- Teachers are wearing the identification badges to conferences and teacher trainings.
- Custodial staff expressed pride in wearing the badges.
- The students responded positively to the badges. With many support people going from school to school during the day, now students can identify the people they see going in and out of their building each day.
- The EAST students who were involved in developing and conducting the survey are now creating a DVD to be given to new students entering the district. The DVD will have basic information about the school district and its services. The DVD is scheduled to be ready in the fall 07.
- Raising the awareness of how welcoming or not our schools are has improved the friendliness of the front offices and they are now more aware when they do something

inappropriate. Being aware of what they are doing often motivates them to apologize when they perceive their action to be rude.

- The secretaries requested that the administrators complete the Customer Service Training also. This was done during a regularly scheduled, 2 ½ hour administrator's meeting. Refreshments were served and door prizes were given.
- The next school year will be a continuation of the efforts to make Ashdown Schools more welcoming. The parent involvement person will send information to the superintendent, principals, and parent facilitators during the summer in frequent mailings to give them ideas for registration and the opening days of school. Different topics will be explored during the year, such as, orientation meetings, involving students in the welcoming process, enlisting community businesses and transitioning students into our school environment when they enter during the school year.
- We will conduct a welcoming school atmosphere survey at the first parent/teacher conference of the 2006-2007 school year.

Win or offend! Most parents and students don't leave a school without an opinion of how they were treated. We all want to do our best to serve students and have parents leave with positive attitudes about us. We all know what we want, but how we achieve it is the difficulty. Where do you start? What do you do? Will anyone help me?

I started this Web-based Professional Development (WBPD) study blindly not really knowing what I was about. After reading the material, reflecting on my past experiences working with homeless and highly mobile students, interviewing parents and researching information, this one thing I know. I have just begun to unfold a project that is so important to the well being of our school. I visited a school office this week and a secretary called me back to discuss changes she could make to improve the atmosphere of her office. Yes! Someone will go with me on this journey to improve their school's atmosphere.

The high school principal called me over to share an idea. He wants to honor academic scholarship in the same way we honor athletes and their parents. Yes! An elementary principal shared her new insight about the number of children in her school who move in and

out multiple times during the year. She was certain she would be more aware of what is happening in their lives from now on. Yes!

Yes, yes, yes, but it will take more planning and work to make changes happen for students and families. To make this project successful I will continue it for another year. Educating the staff on a consistent schedule, enlisting the people who can effect change and giving them support and information, surveying to see how we are doing, and evaluating the effectiveness our methods will be our course next year to improve the welcoming atmosphere of our school.

### ***My Experience with WBP***

***1. Has this work caused you to question any aspect of your professional practice? If yes, what questions did you ask?***

In the past I have focused on academic strategies to improve student achievement that I have not given enough thought to the welcoming school atmosphere of our schools.

***2. Has this work caused you to make any adjustments in your professional practice? If yes what adjustments have you made?***

Yes, this work has caused me to make a written plan for next year to improve the climate of our school district. I will present this plan to the superintendent and the curriculum director next week.

***3. How do those adjustments affect student learning?***

Kentucky has been leading the way showing us how important a welcoming atmosphere is to raising student achievement. I was fortunate enough to visit Ashland, Ky. this year to make a site visit to a Blue Ribbon School. Norma Meeks was the contact person who arranged the visit. Norma has been a mentor to me this year and is a very knowledgeable presenter on the subject of welcoming climate in schools. With her leadership and the research I have done on the subject, I feel we can make some improvement in our schools atmosphere.

***4. How do those adjustments relate to any other aspect of your professional development?***

One of the duties assigned to me by our school district is to develop strategies to improve parent involvement in our schools by working with the Parent Facilitators in each building. I believe that the welcoming plan I have made is simple, with easy steps to complete. I also do public relations for the district and this work will also improve the school district's image in the community.

## Chapter 11

# IMPROVING THE PARENT INVOLVEMENT OF SPANISH-SPEAKING, HOMELESS AND HIGHLY MOBILE FAMILIES

By

Heather Wilson, ELA Resource Teacher

Lowry Elementary

Denver, Colorado

**Abstract:** Explores improving parent and student involvement in schools by fostering family/school communication and making after school programs more accessible. Special attention is given to homeless/highly mobile families with elementary school-aged children and Spanish-speaking parents. Offers suggestions for enhancing use of “Thursday Folders” and language translation of materials.

**Keywords:** Access to Resources, After School Programs, Elementary School, Language Translation, Parent/Family Involvement, Poverty, and Parent Survey

### *Statement of the Problem*

Why is there a lack of parent involvement with homeless and highly mobile parents at Lowry Elementary? More specifically, why are Spanish-speaking parents not involved? There may be several reasons that parents give for their lack of parent involvement in schools. They may be intimidated by educational jargon, which affects communication with teachers. Parents from low socioeconomic status (SES) may also feel threatened by the authority of teachers, their perceived differences in economic status and lack of formal education (Moles, 1993). Culture also affects lack of parent involvement. Carrasquillo and London found that Mexican-American families often tend to view the education of a child as only the school’s responsibility (1993). Consequently, a distance between staff and families is growing in many schools. Unfortunately, in many U.S. schools the needs of these families are not being met and the families are placed on the peripheral of the school. They quietly become the ignored and forgotten minority. This participatory action research focused on the perspectives of these families and sought to discover ways to create a welcoming and inclusive school culture setting.

## ***Importance***

This problem is important because many times it is the children of these “marginalized” families who are not succeeding academically and socially in school. Walberg (1984) concluded that parent involvement in a child’s education was as twice as predictive of academic learning as family social economic status (as cited in Chavkin, 1993). Research has shown that parent involvement positively affects students’ performances (Henderson, 1988). Therefore, by improving parent involvement programs, schools can hope to see some academic improvements in their students. Furthermore, Garcia (2001) noted that the number of Hispanic students in the United States’ schools is growing but they continue to frequently underachieve. If schools truly want to “close the achievement gap” the needs and existence of these families can no longer be ignored. Schools must learn how and why they are marginalizing these families. They must recognize and adapt ways to better improve school/home relationships.

## ***What We Know about Parent Involvement***

There is a large amount of documentation on parent involvement in schools. Research focuses on what works and what is missing. Several recurring themes are apparent in the literature. Many articles discuss the student and school advantages of increased parent involvement such as higher achievement. Parents also personally benefit from becoming more active in their child’s school. Finally, not all parent involvement programs are created equally and do not promote a lot of interaction between schools and home. There is still room for improvement in many parent involvement programs.

## **Student Advantages**

Parent involvement has many positive rewards for students. The most important advantage is increased student performance. Henderson found that the academic achievement of low-income students in particular was directly related to the degree of parent interaction (1988). Dwyer and Hecht found a correlation between students earning higher grades and test scores and effective parent involvement (1992). Herbert Walberg (1984) reviewed twenty-nine controlled studies and concluded that parent involvement in a child’s education was twice as predictive of academic learning as family socioeconomic status (as cited in Chavkin, 1993).

Students benefit from parent involvement in more than purely academic ways. Comer (1984) found that children with more involved parents had less behavior problems at school. Greenwood and Hickman also mentioned that there was an increase in the positive behaviors and emotional development of students who had involved parents (1991). Rich (1985, as cited in Chavkin, 1993) and Sattes (1985, as cited in Chavkin, 1993) found that increased family participation in schools helped produce increases in student attendance, drop-out rates, improved student attitudes and behavior, improved parent/child communication and more parent and community support in school.

### **School Advantages**

Many positive advantages also exist for schools when parent involvement is increased. Schools that favor the involvement of parents outperform schools with little parent involvement (Epstein, 1987; Henderson, 1988). Rioux and Berla examined several parent involvement programs, including preschool, elementary, middle and high schools. They conducted many interviews and found that schools that have long-lasting and comprehensive parent programs are more effective on the basis of student achievement and the overall quality of schools over schools that do not have such programs (1993). Also, schools can benefit from increased volunteer time and increased support for the school when parent involvement is high (Chavkin, 1989; Dwyer & Hecht, 1992). In addition, the school environment is impacted by parent involvement. Chavkin found that increased parent involvement contributes to the overall school-community relationship (1989). Finally, Berger found that teachers and principals have more respect for families that participate in school activities that helps to increase teacher and parent support of school programs (1995).

### **Parent Advantages**

Henderson (1988) addressed the many positive outcomes for parents that occur when they increase their involvement at school. When low-income parents receive training on how to work with their children they develop better attitudes, become more active, and help support school activities. They also begin to seek additional educational opportunities for themselves. Epstein (1986) mailed questionnaires to parents of over 600 first, third, and fifth graders in Maryland. She found that parent involvement also results in increased support of parents for

their children's schools as well as an increase in parents' interest of school programs and their child's progress. Finally, Chavkin, (1989) found that parent-child communication improves.

### **Parent Reasoning for Lack of Involvement**

Parents offer many reasons for not being involved in their child's school. Many researchers surveyed parents to learn these reasons. Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie conducted a study within eight school districts in a mid-Southern state. They had over 1000 participants in their study and used several questionnaires. The researchers found that parents reported minimal opportunities and that school personnel often had indifferent attitudes. They also found that parents were intimidated by educational jargon. This made communication with teachers and school staff difficult (1987). Moles noted that safety in some rough neighborhoods, transportation and childcare issues also impacted parents' ability to be more involved in school. Aronson (1996) conducted a study in Hawaii. She included nine schools in her study and found that language, culture and socioeconomic barriers affect parent involvement. In addition parents' own limited education and negative educational experiences led to parent reasoning for their low parent involvement.

Disadvantaged parents were especially uncomfortable in schools. Moles (1993) discussed the likelihood of parents to feel threatened by the authority of teachers as well as perceived differences in socioeconomic status and lack of formal knowledge. Berger supported this notion. Parents were found to be supportive of their child's education but felt uncomfortable around teachers and principals (1995). Chavkin also noted that minority parents were intimidated by school staff and schools' institutional structure. They felt awkward approaching school personnel especially if they had a previous negative experience with school (1989).

Cultural differences between the family and school also can influence parent involvement. The parents' culture affects how parents become involved as well as whether schools validate their language and culture. Chavkin (1989) found that when minority parents were not involved in a school activity, teachers interpreted it as parent indifference. Carrasquillo and London (1993) further speak to this point. They said that many teachers do not understand the cultural differences between families and school. Furthermore, they reported that some

teachers believed that minority parents were not capable of assuming leadership roles in schools. And teachers assumed that poor parent attendance at school events signified low parent interest. Moles, however noted that some educators acknowledge that parents from different ethnic groups may be uncomfortable communicating with teachers due to language barriers or differences in cultural values (1993).

Chavkin and Gonzales (1995) and Carrasquillo and London (1993) reported that Mexican American families often tend to view the academic development of a child as the school's responsibility. School is seen as a bureaucracy controlled by non-Hispanics and that the role of home and school are separate and should not interfere with each other (Chavkin and Gonzales, 1995). Moles (1993) mentioned that many Mexican Americans believe that they are being helpful by keeping a respectful distance from the schools. For many of them the school represents a foreign institution directed by whites who are insensitive to cultural and language differences. Furthermore Carrasquillo and London distinguished that many Mexican American parents are very respectful of teachers and do not want to interfere (1993).

There is a large amount of research on parent involvement and its role in children's educations. Parent involvement is considered to be a crucial part of education that is also at times the most difficult for educators to accomplish. Research has shown that there are student, school, and parent advantages for having successful parent involvement programs. However, there is not a lot of research that focuses on the communication barriers specifically between schools and home. Furthermore, there is more to learn about school culture and its affect on parent involvement. Still, many Latino students are not performing as well as their Anglo peers and are over-represented in Special Education programs in their schools. This research project aimed to improve the communication between home and school thus impacting parent involvement.

### ***The Setting***

This action research project took place at Lowry Elementary. Lowry is a Denver Public School located in the Southeast area. It is a relatively new school and has been open for 4 years. The area has recently undergone a large redevelopment since the days of being an Air Force Base. Many high-end luxury homes have been built and there has been a large amount

of people moving to the area. This is the reason for the school's existence. In addition, a few apartments were built prior to the redevelopment of Lowry as affordable housing. There are two transitional housing programs within these affordable multi-family units. These programs, through the assistance of Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) help homeless and highly mobile families. They provide two years of rental assistance, case management and other support services. Lowry Elementary's homeless children come from these two apartment complexes. Thus the school has a unique population, students from single-family expensive homes and students from transitional housing attend the same school. The school also has a very strong and active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) with large fundraising capabilities. The challenge the school staff faces is how to meet the needs of both populations when they are so different.

## ***THE CYCLES OF RESEARCH:***

### ***The First Cycle***

As the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at Lowry Elementary, I work closely with the school's Spanish speaking families. I am also one of a very few staff members who speaks Spanish. I have a lot of contact with Spanish speaking families in the school. Many of the families I work with live in the transitional housing mentioned before and I was concerned about the parents' participation at school events. Furthermore, I wondered if parents were receiving appropriate information about the school and I wondered about their comfort level in the school.

To begin my research, I created a survey that was designed to learn more about parents' participation in many school events. It also was designed to learn if parents were reading the Thursday folders from our school. The Thursday folder is a communication system created to go back and forth between parents and school. Every Thursday, all important information from the school and teachers is placed in the Thursday folder and the school expectation is for parents to read the information to know what is going on at school. The survey also addressed questions about the school culture. Parents were asked questions such as: Do you feel the school does a good job of communicating with parents? Do you feel comfortable and

welcomed in the school? Some questions pertained to specific events that were held at the school. Events were held after school or during school and some included parents while others were for children during the school day. The survey was created to learn how well parents were informed about school events. All items on the survey had information that was presented in the Thursday folder. (See appendix A for complete survey)

Sixty surveys were sent home, all known Spanish-speaking families and homeless and highly mobile families in the building received a survey. The surveys were sent home with students and they were informed they would receive a candy upon return of the survey. Surveys in Spanish were sent to monolingual Spanish-speaking parents. Surveys in Spanish and English were sent to bilingual families and they were asked to complete only one survey in the language of their choice. Eighteen surveys were returned, of the eighteen, eight Spanish surveys were received.

### ***First Cycle: Survey Results***

Overall, the results of the survey seemed to be optimistic. Most of the time parents answered positively to questions and no questions received an extremely negative response. However some parents did indicate some room for improvement for the school. For example, when asked if parents felt that the school did a good job of communicating with parents 5 parents responded that it did an okay job. Many of the Spanish responses indicated a lack of translated items. For example one parent responded in Spanish, “Sometimes communication is not sufficient.”

Another question asked if parents felt comfortable and welcomed in the school. Thirteen parents answered yes, all of the time however, five parents responded only with some of the time. Some comments were, “the teachers are very rude, the secretaries don’t always make us feel welcomed, I don’t speak a lot of English and it is difficult to communicate, sometimes I feel ignored.”

When parents were asked about their participation in school events, one responded indicating they attend school events all of the time, eleven responded they attend school events some of the time, four responded rarely, and two responded never. Some comments were, “I was not invited to anything, I have to work just like everyone else, and I have a baby.” Student

participation in events after-school was limited however at least 13 parents responded that their child had taken at least one after-school enrichment program. When asked about the student's participation in a traveling theater after school weeklong program, 7 parents responded that they didn't know what it was. Only three of the surveyed parents attended a free movie night at Lowry.

When asked specifically if parents read the contents of the Thursday folder, five parents answered always, eleven answered most of the time and two parents answered sometimes or never. One parent's comments were, "I didn't know there was a folder."

### ***The Thursday Folder Protocol: The Second Cycle***

The survey was very helpful in knowing how well the school is communicating with its H&HM families. Although the Thursday folder system works for many parents I was concerned about the lack of translated materials for Spanish-speaking parents. So for my next step in my research I created a Thursday Folder protocol. This protocol was established in order to have school information translated. I recruited parent volunteers and the assistance of our Spanish-speaking paraprofessional to help with the translating of materials. I enlisted the PTO, principal, teachers and secretaries as well. I established a timeline for all items that were to go into the folder. The timeline encouraged the school members and PTO to have all items intended for the Thursday folder to be sent to me by the previous Friday, which would give my volunteers and I until Wednesday to have all materials translated and added to the Thursday Folders. I kept a list of families who should receive Spanish materials.

### ***Second Cycle: Results***

The protocol was a bit difficult for people to get used to. At first items were sent to me late or not at all. Some people or groups, like the PTO, were great about sticking to the deadline but other groups did not adhere to it and many never sent me their items to be translated. I also began to realize the plan was not fool proof. I had a difficult time keeping and communicating with volunteer translators. Often they did not receive my emails or were not able to get the items translated in time. Others started the project with a lot of enthusiasm and were available to translate often but slowly throughout the year they became less available.

I quickly realized how much I was trying to take on, the Thursday folder contained a lot of information and not all was crucial to our Spanish speaking families. It was becoming increasingly difficult to get all items translated with the lack of consistent translators. Our Spanish-speaking paraprofessional quickly became our most reliable translator. He had office hours during his workday in which he was allowed to work on translations. So, the protocol was adapted. The items that were of vital importance to families became the priority for example, information about important school news and activities were translated first. This allowed for most of the translating to be done in house by our paraprofessional. This made the protocol a little bit easier to follow.

### ***Conclusion, Thoughts and Reflections***

The results of the two cycles of my research were not reflected in qualitative data. However much was observed on and reflected upon throughout this yearlong project. The survey was a useful and helpful tool to gain better insights about H&HM parents feel.

I found it interesting that many parents were reading information and claimed to know what was going on at school yet; they often are still not involved. I learned several reasons for their lack of involvement such as having to work, taking care of other children, or simply lack of time. I also wondered if the answers to all of the survey questions were entirely honest. Perhaps due to my position of authority, as a teacher, parents felt compelled to answer in a certain way. I especially found it interesting that Spanish-speaking parents claimed to know about several school events that had never been announced in Spanish. Also, a large amount of information about the children's theater group after school had gone home in the Thursday folder yet when asked whether their child had participated, many parents said they did not know what it was. This showed a contradiction in their answers because when asked if the parents read the contents of the Thursday folder, many answered always or most of the time. My conjecture would be: a) parents are resourceful, b) know other sources to learn information about school and felt they had to answer a certain way to my survey. I think they may have felt that they had to give me the "right" answer.

Unfortunately, I do not know if parents were answering honestly or not to my survey. For other educators investigating similar conditions I would recommend a focus group. This would have allowed me to speak to parents face-to-face and eliminate some of the tension that was created. Perhaps it would have made them feel more comfortable and they would have told me their true feelings.

The creation of a Thursday folder protocol for the translation of items into Spanish for many Lowry families was a great start for our school. It forced people to remember our Spanish-speaking families and it began the translation of many important documents into Spanish. However, for the protocol to be a success much more needs to be done. First, there has to buy-in from the entire staff and PTO. Unfortunately, many items were not translated due to people forgetting to send me information, the lack of time to send the information or simply people not caring about the information getting translated. For Lowry to truly be a community we need to include all of its members, by not translating items, people and families are being left out.

The protocol also needs more support from the administration. Truly for one teacher to be responsible for the translation of the entire amount of documents that a school needs is too much. While other staff members and teachers are certainly capable of sharing the load, they are not required to and very often do not have items translated. Attempting to translate many of a school's documents is a large commitment however it is one that must be accepted. Until language minority families are included, a school cannot be a complete community.

Finally, I propose more than one form of communication for parents to receive information. While, Thursday folders are indeed useful, we could also have a webpage that would parents to visit to know the school's happenings. Also, many parents do not have computers, the time or ability to read the mountains for paperwork that is sent with children. Phone trees could be used to disseminate important information. Schools need to find more ways keep parents informed thus allowing for more involvement.

My research sought to improve parent involvement through creating better communication between parents and home. The intention was that this would translate to better-informed parents and subsequently more involved parents. This project was a very small step in the

ways to increase parent involvement in schools. It also sought to learn parents' thoughts and feelings about some of the current programs our school offers and the way that we are disseminating information. Both the survey and establishment of a Thursday Folder Protocol were helpful in learning more and doing better. There are several steps I recommend a school follow if they would like to implement a system to translate materials in their buildings.

1. Make the commitment. To truly be successful at translating documents and including non-English speaking families, all staff members have to be committed. Administrative has to behind the goal.
2. Investigate if your district has a translating department that can help translate documents for your school. Also, find out how long it takes to translate items.
3. Collect all important information for a school that is not time sensitive and send it to translating department. These items include school registration forms, dress codes and general information about the school.
4. Form a translating committee that includes staff members, the administrator, and volunteers that can create a system for translating items.
5. Recruit bilingual individuals that can help to translate items. Recruit as many as possible so that one person is not overwhelmed.
6. If possible conduct all business by email. This allows the volunteer to work offsite or to possibly use a school computer and it creates virtual documents that can be saved and quickly changed for future use.

Following these steps will help a school to create a communication system that translates documents. It is a slow and difficult change. It is especially difficult when the non-English speaking families are the minorities at school. There is a difficulty to get buy-in from everybody. However, these schools need items translated. It is crucial to show parents that you respect them and want them involved. How can parents become involved if they don't know to what they have been invited?

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## **Appendix A**

Dear Parents,

I am working on a research project that is partly focused on how to better improve communication between school and home. Your honest answers to the following questions may help us. All surveys will remain anonymous and your participation is greatly appreciated. Please only fill out one survey per family and you do not need to put your name on it.

Thank You,  
Heather Wilson

**Please circle the answer that best fits you and add comments where asked.**

**1. Do you feel the school does a good job of communicating with parents?**

It does a good job                      It does an okay job                      It does a bad job

Please explain your answer:

**2. Do you feel comfortable and welcomed in the school?**

Yes, all of the time    Some of the time                      Rarely                      Never

Please explain your answer:

**3. Do you attend school events?**

Yes, all of the time    Some of the time                      Rarely                      Never

Please explain your answer:

**4. Has your child taken an after-school enrichment class?**

Yes, he/she has taken several                      Yes, he/she has taken a few                      No

Please explain why if you answered no:

**5. Did your child participate in the Missoula Children's Theater after school program?**

Yes No, he/she didn't make it                      No, he/she didn't have the time    No, what is it?

**6. Who do you call or speak to when you have a question about school?**

No one    my child's teacher    the secretary    another parent    the principal    other

Why do you speak to the person you selected?

**7. Have you attended at least one movie night at Lowry?**

Yes No

Please explain why if you selected no:

**8. Does your child participate in spirit days at school, such as backwards day, or Western day?**

Yes No

Please explain why if you selected no:

**9. Does your child participate in fundraisers for the school such as Sally Foster?**

Yes No

Please explain why if you selected no:

**10. Do you read the contents of the Thursday folders?**

Always    most of the times    sometimes    never

Please explain your answer:

**11. Do you read the monthly newsletter sent out by the principal and office?**

Yes No

Please explain why if you selected no: